

The Briefing



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Children's ministry: It takes a body

[Gordon Cheng \(http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/authors/gordon-cheng/\)](http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/authors/gordon-cheng/) | 8 July, 2013

Over the course of nearly 20 years in children's ministry (not including his own childhood), Bruce Linton realized that the establishing principle behind starting a children's ministry in a church is usually this: noise must be contained so that we, the grown-ups, can get on with church.

This is certainly *a* starting point. But in this series of *Briefing* articles, we will spell out with examples some other principles that have come to guide the gospel ministry of Bruce and his team of leaders at Christ Church Gladesville, an Anglican church in Sydney's inner north-west. [1 \(#fn-22803-1\)](#). In this particular article we're going to consider who should be involved in children's ministry, and you may be surprisingly encouraged by the end.

The first of several [2 \(#fn-22803-2\)](#) principles is this:

The essential work of children's ministry is to partner with families in the evangelism and discipleship of their own children.

Translated and expanded, that means that Dad's the boss of gospel ministry in his family. Mum's his helper. So to everyone else who is not mum or dad, no matter how important you are in other parts of life or within the church: fall into line and pull your weight, helping parents if and as you can and as God gives you grace and opportunity. This injunction applies equally to brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and homeless people who have come to church because they know they will get a cup of tea and won't be asked to leave.

A quick sidestep. Why make this principle the first principle? Wouldn't it be better to go with the principle I'll discuss in my next article, to evangelize both children and parents within the local area?

The answer lies not in any failure of nerve based on the general scariness of evangelism. Yes, it's true, no-one by nature wants to hear that Jesus is Lord. In particular, no-one by nature wants to know that we must serve him and be forgiven, or reject him and face eternal death. "I'd rather die" is our knee-jerk response to this gospel.

"The principle at work here is that evangelism begins in the home. Our first job is to bring the gospel to our own heart and to our own families."

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Rather, the principle at work here is that evangelism begins in the home. Our first job is to bring the gospel to our own heart and to our own families. No point evangelizing the neighbours or their children if they look over the fence to discover that the gospel has made no difference to us.

Here we want to bring in two biblical ideas to anchor this view.

The first idea is that it's the primary responsibility of the father and mother to teach their child about God and about life—a responsibility that can be shared with the children's worker and many others, but mustn't be taken over by him, her, or anyone else.

Here is a passage in Deuteronomy that exemplifies and justifies the key roles of fathers and mothers:

"When your son asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us.'" ([Deut 6:20-25](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Deut%206.20-25).)

These verses simply say that it's the job of the parent to teach the child the family history. If that history involves being rescued from slavery in Egypt, or rescued from sin through trust in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, so much the better. You can read the entire book of Proverbs for an example of what such parenting might look like.

The second Bible idea allows us to bring in someone other than mum and dad to talk about the Lord Jesus to our children. Here it is: the church is our one true family. [1 Timothy 3:15](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Tim%203.15) says that the church is "the household of God". When Jesus calls people to follow him, he makes it clear that their commitment to him, and to each other, beats allegiance to the biological family hands down. Listen to Jesus:

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go". And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." ([Luke 9:57-60](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%209.57-60) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%209.57-60>))

There's a good word for aunts, uncles, orphans, and single people who are worried that there is nothing in children's ministry for them. Church is family, and if you love Jesus and have been forgiven of your sins in him, you are part of that family. Now be what you are!

So remembering these things and looking forward, who should we invite and involve in children's ministry?

At one end of the spectrum, there's the person who attracts children just by standing around, like a Pied Piper, only without the flute, the rats, or the desire to lead children over a hill into a forgotten valley far far away. Some of the greatest and best evangelists in the world today are children's evangelists. Some have an almost supernatural ability to communicate the gospel in a talk that little children will understand and that listening adults, believers and unbelievers alike, will find captivating.

Then, at the other end of the spectrum, there are the long-term children's workers and teachers who labour over many weeks and years to give them a wide-ranging and vivid knowledge of the stories and big ideas of the Bible. The leader who can do a chalk talk in their sleep, blindfolded, will never lack for an audience of stunned and wondering six-year-olds, even if they never once ask those to whom they're speaking to make a commitment to the Lord Jesus.

But the best question to ask, as we seek to communicate the gospel to our children at the beginning, middle and on through to the end of their lives, is can we have everybody?

Can we please have the superb children's evangelist, who can attract the crowd on the beach, and then tell the children that Jesus is no Cookie Monster but God himself?

And standing next to, or just behind him, can we also have the flustered and anxious middle-aged man? The one who has somehow, through Bible reading alone, taught his nephews and nieces from an early age that Jesus walked on water because he is equally God and man, and is daily praying that his young family members and their friends will trust this same Jesus as well.

Further back in the crowd, behind the evangelist, may we also have the young, plain and sometimes intimidating school teacher who has taken a long period of leave to care for her three children, but who has been asked to come back to teach at the local school in the new year, because so many parents and children have asked after her?

In fact, may we have the whole crowd? The man who can't make eye contact with adults, but smiles at children. The grandmother who misses her grandchildren.

The answer, we believe, is and should be 'yes'. Then we can have it all, under God and in Christ. We can have children coming to know Jesus, for the very first time, as their Lord and Saviour. And we can have children who, having understood that Jesus is Lord and Saviour, are daily growing in their knowledge and love of him, and seeking to live that out in their families and with their friends.

At least, that is our experience; but it will take time, thought, prayer, and a church full of people ready to pursue this godly aim.

Now, a basic, practical question: who, under God, will be leader (paid or unpaid) of the ministry?

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If the church family really is a family, then the elders for their part are like the fathers of the church, chosen at least partly because they are able to run their own households well ([1 Tim 3:4](#), <https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Tim%203.4>), [12](#) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Tim%203.12>)). In the same way as no father in a family really gets to opt out of nappy-changing or toilet-cleaning, without rightly facing some questions about their character, so no elder ought to exempt themselves from ministry to children on the grounds that they have chosen instead to be preachers. Yes, we're looking at you senior minister, but in the nicest possible way.

This doesn't mean that the senior minister will be in the children's Sunday school on every—or even many—Sundays. But it will mean finding other ways to communicate to everyone involved in children's ministry that the senior minister is part of the team. Helping load luggage on to the bus for the children's weekend away, greeting parents as they drop off their children. Linking the children's Sunday school program to the preaching program, so that parents know that what they are hearing in church is something they can discuss with their children in the car on the way home. Letting the children's worker know a couple of months ahead of time about the planned preaching series for the year or the next term, so that they and their helpers can start to generate good ideas about how to teach the message to children.

And who to appoint as the children's worker? Assuming the church has the budget, but even if not, how should you assess the enthusiastic volunteer? As in all eldership positions, the person should be someone with Christian commitment, character, and capability (read *The Trellis and the Vine* to see these ideas expanded on, or read 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). But in addition to this, if your aim is to build an enduring biblical ministry to children, as opposed to one that may burn brightly but briefly, the obvious choice may not always be the best choice.

In our observation, and with no hint of disrespect to those who fit this profile, those chosen to lead children's ministries are often enthusiastic, energetic women with ability to teach infants and primary school. That's a good thing, and not a bad thing. It *may* even be the best thing.

But consider: the overwhelming trend in many churches, at least in westernized cultures, is for men to be under-represented in the ranks of regular, church-going Bible-believing Christians. And, at least here in Australia (according to reliable local statistics), this trend begins not in adulthood or even in youth group, but at about the age of ten, when boys will start insisting on being left out of 'boring' church activities, and parents will start to take the line of least resistance and let them stay home.

If, like me, you are a nerd who likes drawing and music, a program that reminds you of infants or primary school craft sessions will be just fine. But many, many boys—and some girls—are like Bruce, who as a ten-year-old was only ever able to absorb information while running, moving, kicking, or fidgeting.

For someone like Bruce, an extended version of primary school is not likely to be the place that he will want to spend his Sundays, unless he is bribed to listen to a ten minute Bible talk by being offered a fifty minute soccer game in the church yard.

So, whether you are dealing with Bruces, Gordons, or Katies, it may be that the children's worker you choose will not necessarily be the person who can impress parents by fulfilling that original law of Sunday school: keep the noise down!

Rather, we might choose as the leader the one who understands and sympathizes with the fidgety child: the leader who is theologically astute enough to be able to run a game with a theological point; the leader being someone who will help children understand that Jesus is Lord (which is the message of Corinthians, which by an extraordinary coincidence is most likely the book being taught in our church this term).

"...the work of running a gospel ministry, a ministry of evangelism and discipleship with children, is a work for the whole church family"

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That example of how to choose good children's leaders goes back to the principle we're demonstrating: that the work of running a gospel ministry, a ministry of evangelism and discipleship with children, is a work for the whole church family. Once we understand that this is so, we will want to broaden the net to include as many of our keen and gifted Christian congregation members as we possibly can; both likely and unlikely.

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Here are some practical ideas:

Firstly, throw everyone you've got at the work. Your best leaders. Your worst leaders. Everyone in between. Whatever you do, don't allow the youth worker and the small group leader-recruiter to take everybody away. If children become Christians, they will grow up to become youth group leaders and small group leaders! So tell the youth leader to wait ten years for his leaders to come through your group, and likewise tell the small group leader to wait twenty years. In the meantime, they will need to, as my daughter might say, LWTP (Live With the Pain).

A personal testimony from Bruce: one of his good friends, a man who is well and truly capable of leading the whole church, has been helping lead primary school groups on Friday nights for the past ten years or so. This is good, and shows how a church family works. Under him, others have become leaders and have blessed the whole church.

Secondly, meet with your leaders, pray with your leaders, and regularly and often invite parents to join you. Yes, parents can help you lead if and as you invite them. Yes, you will certainly go into church with or without those leaders to explain to the grown-ups and other visitors what the children are learning. Yes, you will invite, welcome and submit to the senior minister when he wants to meet with your leaders to plan and explain what the church's program is for the next term, and how he wants to present certain key theological ideas focusing in on the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus (as seen in [1 Corinthians 1](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Cor%201) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Cor%201>), and [1 Corinthians 15](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Cor%2015) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Cor%2015>)).

Thirdly, embrace the oddball (oddball personal details changed in the following stories).

Embrace the lady who is not seriously on the Asperger's scale, but is unusual. Part of her unusualness lies in her ability to design a \$2 torch out of A4 paper, paperclips and a dumpster dive at the local hardware shop. She wants to do it not just because she can but because she knows that Jesus is the light of the world, and that children who do the torch activity will have the torch and handwritten Bible verse sitting on top of their fridge with the other torches for months to come. (This idea may or may not be based on the observation of the top of the author's fridge.)

Embrace as one of the team the unemployable man who really needs as much looking after as any of the children because of his disability issues, but radiates pure joy at being part of the team. Yes, you had to recruit another team member to look after him. No, any sensible analysis says he should have been gently moved aside to whatever places such men are gently moved aside to. But his heart is for the gospel, and has been for many years, and now he is here on the team, and who really knows how God will use him. Perhaps he will simply be a drain on resources. Is this actually bad for the gospel?

Fourthly, come back for the next article to read and learn what evangelism in and from the church family might look like.

1. Declaration of interest: all three of my daughters benefited from Bruce's gospel work, and I've been one of the dozens of leaders, parents, gospel ministers and helpers who have followed Bruce into local schools, holiday clubs, Sunday programs, Friday night children's clubs, and regular children's camps. I am an unashamed and biased fan. [🔗 \(#fnref-22803-1\)](#)
2. Actually, there are four principles, but as there is a lot to say and time to say it in future articles, let's not limit ourselves. [🔗 \(#fnref-22803-2\)](#)

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